

It Was a Rude Jolt When She Was Called a Freckle-Faced Shrimp by Ben as the Honeymoon Started.

ABOVE RUBIES

BY
FANNIE HEASLIP LEA.

OIS WHEELER, who had one brief half-hour before been Lois Brooks, stood at the mirror of her dressing table and tied with shaking fingers a cool gray web of a veil about her small gray hat.

Little broken noises of laughter and talk drifted up the stairs to her. The wedding guests were waiting. Waiting for her, Lois Wheeler (Lois Brooks that was), to come down those stairs, put her hand in Ben's hand and drive away with him on their honeymoon . . . away from all her friends . . . away from her mother . . . her mother, who had always been there to turn to, whenever and however she needed her. Suppose she needed her mother now?

That brought the tears—in a blinding rush.

Another came in at the door and laughed them away.

"You silly child! What's all this about? Now, you'll have to powder your nose all over again." The gray-haired woman in the violet silk gown was bravely clinging to commonplaces. "Everything in your bag, my child?" Ben says you haven't any more much time!"

Lois turned and hung her arms about her mother childishly. "I don't want to go!" she whispered.

"Ben's a good boy," said her mother, kissing the smooth young cheek and swallowing a sob of her own. "I'll trust you with him. Come on, now, my lamb—don't be such a mommy-baby! You're going off on a beautiful trip with your Uncle Aleck's check to pay for everything. Isn't everybody having a wedding present like that? All that to spend on one little honeymoon! Come along, now, everybody's waiting. Put on your gloves and see if you've got a clean hanky."

"I'm not," said Lois obediently. She kissed her mother desperately hard and smiled a misty little smile. "Bless my baby's heart!" whispered her mother. They clung together for a moment.

"Lois" called a man's deep voice from the foot of the stairs.

And Lois went down, flushing deeper with every step.

* * *

IT occurred to her, in the machine, at last, on the way to the station, that Ben was flushed as well. His eyes were shining. She noticed that his hand shook when he closed the door. Was Ben afraid of her? As she was afraid of him? She tried to think back to all their beautiful hours together—his arms about her, his lips on hers. Of course he couldn't very well kiss her, in the car, with the hired chauffeur sitting up just in front of them; but didn't a perfectly new lord usually lead off with some tender phrase? Ben had made a wonderful lover; was he going to let down as a husband?

Lois sat there, a prey to vastly conflicting emotions, till they left the car for the train and saw the yellow stuccoed walls of the neat little station slip away from them, slowly, relentlessly . . .

She settled herself in their compartment with a stoical appearance of being altogether accustomed to it, quaintly at variance with the bridal newness of her bags.

"Chilly in this car, isn't it?" Ben commented uneasily.

Lois said yes, she believed it was, although as a matter of fact it hadn't occurred to her, and her coat was thinner than his.

He sat beside her, but made no efforts even to take her hand. His manner was distinctly nervous. Also, his flush persisted and his eyes, now that she looked at him more closely, were terribly bloodshot, for all their brightness.

Lois' heart sank, like a stone in deep water. There had been a bachelor dinner the night before—she had heard stories of bridegrooms who drew upon Dutch courage . . . Was she starting upon her honeymoon with that?

However, Ben's quietness reassured her—he couldn't, with that voice, that gentle manner.

"Let's go out in the dining car now," he suggested, rising suddenly. "It might be warmer out there."

Lois wasn't cold or hungry, but she went along quiescently.

They had a table to themselves beside a window and watched the California landscape slip by, green and bronze and gold in the waning daylight. Ben consulted Lois' preferences assiduously, but ordered almost nothing for himself.

* * *

NEXT morning, when she awoke after a belated and heavy slumber, the landscape outside was blanketed in snow, a flawless and blinding whiteness. To Lois' inexperienced eyes the sight was awesomely beautiful, an almost religious thrill.

"Oh, Ben," she cried softly, when she leaned over him to say good morning, not with dear-bought wisdom, to ask him how he felt, "you must see the snow; it's perfectly wonderful! All over everything, exactly like a Christmas card!" She lifted the shade an enthusiastic six inches.

Ben uttered an agonized cry that was almost a yell, and covered his eyes with both hands. "Put it down!" he gasped. "Put it down—it's killing me!" There was no question of the genuineness of his suffering.

He turned back to look at Ben once more. He lay in a kind of stupor. She had the sofa berth made down and went to bed, needless to say not to sleep. Three times during the night she climbed out and changed the towel on Ben's poor burning head. Once he thanked her, drowsily. Once he asked her if she had seen the airplane just outside the window. Once merely groaned.

* * *

In the morning about 7 she opened them experimentally, and became aware of Ben lying in the other bed, two feet or so away from her. It gave her something of a start. She had not at once remembered that she was married.

"How do you feel?" she asked politely. "Oh, I'm sorry—I don't mean that."

"That young squirt of a doctor that was in here yesterday," Ben informed her vindictively, "said I had no business up, and put me back to bed. How do you feel?"

"Rotten," said Lois, weakly gloomy. "He gave you some sort of dope for the fever. You slept nearly all day, didn't you?"

She drew a long sigh. "I remember him—don't remember much else—I was so miserable. What does he think I've got?"

"I imagine he doesn't know any more about it than we do ourselves. He said he'd try and get you a nurse, but they're most of them busy; what ever this is—I'm afraid you caught it from me."

"That's what it was," said Ben. He clutched his bathrobe once more and started for the telephone. "I'm going to ask how much we're paying a day," he said thoughtfully, "just for greens."

It appeared upon investigation that they were paying \$25 a day, for room and bath.

Ben went back to bed, rather heavily.

"Gosh," was his only comment.

"But, Ben," said Lois worriedly, "that's nothing—any hotel—we'll be eating our heads off, won't we? Even on invalid sort of food. What will we do when we get well and want steaks and crabmeat and—"

"Not at all—" Lois shut her eyes and a cruel, hot tear rolled down each cheek.

This—after the honeymoon of her dreams! How she and Ben had planned to spend Uncle Aleck's check! Theaters—all, the best seats—restaurants, roses with lights, fragrant with flowers, savory with food, rhythmic with music, dancing between courses.

Ben's voice rose suddenly, unsteadily with embarrassment: "Lois—I want you to tell me—something! When I had fever, on the train—I had a pretty bad fever, didn't I?"

He tried to be at little trouble as possible, now—Lois saw that—but her

ben himself was talking, in a queer, breathless sort of voice, with an occasional choked-off groan.

"Listen, Lois," he was saying: "I want you to listen to me—in case I should be seriously ill—which I probably won't—probably nothing but a cold—be all right tomorrow—well, in case I should—I want you to take my pocketbook, here—is—and my traveler's checks—and take care of them . . ."

"He's going to die!" wailed Lois to herself. She replied soothingly.

"Yes, Ben pocketbook and traveler's checks—and take care of them. But you'll be all right, tomorrow, I'm sure."

"Hope so," said Ben, "My head hurts terribly . . . Pull down that shade, will you—all the way down! It was not the tone in which he usually addressed her. Lois reached across him and pulled down the shade with dignity.

"Take the railroad tickets, too" he went on. "I'll keep my watch, under the pillow, here. There's plenty of money for everything—we'll go straight to a hotel when we get to Chicago."

"Don't you think it might be a good plan to get off the train, at the next good-sized town, and go to a hospital?" suggested Lois timidly.

"I do not," he retorted, almost savagely. "What do you think is the matter with me: pneumonia?"

It was just about what Lois did think, so she hastened to deny it.

"Poor little girl!" said Ben remorsefully, "frightened to death, aren't you? I don't want you to wear yourself out now—looking after me—I'll be all right."

He added with a groan and a jerk, "Can't you get that blasted shade any lower than that? My eyes are killing me!"

Lois struggled with the shade, tears in her own eyes.

He groaned once or twice in a suppressed sort of way.

"Does your chest—hurt you? Or your side?" Lois offered, her shyness melting before the suffering in his voice.

He turned a feeble glace on her: "For heaven's sake don't ask me how I feel! I haven't got pneumonia, if that's what you want to know; but I am burning up with some kind of rotten fever or something. Don't sit there and stare at me—go and get ice water or something to put on my head—or stop the train long enough for me to jump out of the window—and die in the ditch!"

"Oh, Ben! If only there was a doctor on the train!"

"Don't want a doctor!" he muttered angrily . . . "Don't you let a doctor come near me! All I need is rest—and something cold on my head. Are you going to get it for me—or not?" He added, to Lois' frozen horror, "You little freckle-faced shrimp!"

Poor child, she dripped tears as well as ice water on the stiff, clean towel retrieved from the shelf in the tiny washroom.

It was all very well to tell herself that Ben was a little out of his head with fever, as he undoubtedly was; that did not alter the fact that one does not go off on a honeymoon to be addressed as a freckle-faced shrimp.

The porter suggested a place called the Fairbridge.

"Yo' kin be took care of good," he assured her. The lady of the thermometer mentioned the Fairbridge as well—"wonderful service."

They got into the city of their destination on a gray, bleak, ugly morning. Ben, miraculously improved, to the extent of no fever, eating a soft-boiled egg for breakfast, and getting into his clothes thereafter, sat among the bags, a slightly gaunt, but still a comforting evidence of masculinity intelligence, on which to draw, if need be.

Lois, shivering, checked the luggage, tipped the porter, tipped a red-cap, and sank into a black and yellow taxi with her senses whirling.

They came at last to the Fairbridge, an imposing facade, with an imposing sequence of brown-and-gold funkeys, passing one's bags along . . . Lois sat huddled in a high-backed, carved chair in a waste of old-gold and leaf-brown lobby, her eyes on a great vase of heavy-headed roses, while Ben, pale and shaky, registered at the desk and asked for rooms.

Ben held out doggedly.

"Get up and go around a bit, and see how soon it comes back on you," the doctor advised blandly.

Lois turned great, imploring eyes on him.

"How soon do you think I can get up, Doctor?"

"Oh, in a day or so—if you behave nicely," Dr. Weinbrich made cheery answer.

* * *

SILENCE descended upon the unhappy inmates of that rose-wreathed boudoir after the doctor's departure. It had been a long night. A week. Ten days. If you are careful. And run no risks. Stay quiet. Eat. Keep up your resistance. Above all, rest."

"But my fever is almost gone now," Ben held out doggedly.

"Get up and go around a bit, and see how soon it comes back on you," the doctor advised blandly.

Lois turned great, imploring eyes on him.

"How soon do you think I can get up, Doctor?"

"Oh, in a day or so—if you behave nicely," Dr. Weinbrich made cheery answer.

* * *

AT about 5 o'clock the next morning Lois took her own temperature and discovered that she still had fever, but not so much. She felt as if she had been beaten with whips, as if all vitality had gone out of her.

She looked across at Ben, and he smiled hopefully back at her.

He offered optimistically: "The doctor said we were to eat—keep up our resistance."

The telephone stood on the desk. Ben retrieved his bathrobe and got to it.

After fifteen minutes or so, a brown-and-gold youth with a menu card arrived from the dining room.

Ben ordered, with tragic precaution, orange juice, oatmeal, toast.

"I think we'd better go slow on food," he assured Lois. She submitted listlessly to another spoonful.

The breakfast arrived eventually, garnished with silver, and glass, thin shining plates, napkins. They ate, thin like a little bit delirious myself—I never was so unhappy in my whole life long."

She lay back with a despairing groan.

She turned over and began to cry.

"I guess it's fu we've got," she confessed after a while in a plaintive whimper. "They say it makes you terribly low in your mind."

"Then I've got it," Ben returned grimly.

"But, Ben, it couldn't possibly cost one-fourth of that!"

"We're paying for the gold braid around the waiter's neck and the polish on his fingernails," said Ben, with hollow mirth.

They indulged in a weak cackle of mutual laughter. Across the intervening gulf they even looked at each other with a species of kindness.

Comrades in unbelievable misfortune. Applauders of each other's jokes.

It was, however, an extraordinary honeymoon, as had been said before.

Upon the third day Ben was allowed by the doctor to get up and sit by the window in a bathrobe and slippers. He managed to shave as well and present something of his old gallant good looks. On the fourth day Ben advanced to a stroll in the lobby, on the fifth he went out to look at the town—and Lois still tied to her bed!

She got up while he was gone, tottered feebly to the mirror and looked at herself—a sight that drew a delicate fit of agony.

She locked herself into the bathroom with her shining new dressing gown. Half an hour later she came forth, weak and spent, but with soft, smooth hair rippling about the shoulders of a delicate orchid nightgown, with a faint rose flush and a softly pink mouth, making of her violet shadowed eyes not desolation, but fragility merely. *

"I may have more temperature for this, but I can't help it," she sighed to herself as she crept back into bed, dragging with her two coquettish little lace pillows which had been part of her trousseau. "If I'm going to die, I'd like Ben to remember me with regret, anyhow."

Ben, opening the door upon her some little time later, stopped, wordless, and stared. He carried a florist's box under one arm; a smaller package protruded from his coat pocket. He seemed distinctly weary, but really exultant.

"Why—why, Lois!" he stammered.

"Gosh, you look beautiful! What's happened to you?"

"Just a little powder and paint, old dear!" said Lois with weak-kneed enthusiasm. "What's in the box?"

"Roses," said Ben simply. He came and sat on the side of her bed, cut the string and lifted off the cover.

A draft of fragrance came up from the loveliness of pale petals underlaid by green. "And a new perfume," went on the returned prodigal proudly, "called something d'amour, that smelled exactly like you." He opened the smaller package, handed out a small, exquisite little lettered box of gray and gold. "And—this is the big thrill—we're going to have a party tonight—candles on the table and flowers and everything!"

* * *

"BEN," said Lois suddenly—she

had been a warm little tremor of happiness still over her as she lay there looking at his smooth dark head, his keen, pleasant gray eyes,

the set of his shoulders, the quizzical twist of his smile; it seemed queer,

but somehow rather wonderful to

himself wearily back from successive terrors of pain and flame, was in no condition to observe the unfitness of any one else.

No wonder that on the second day of Ben's fever went down little chilly tremors began to ripple over Lois, and her eyes, when she turned them in her head, ached with a dull bone-grinding ache. She said to herself, stubbornly, that this was not the time for her to give in, and con-

tinued to wait upon Ben with maternal fervor. Ben, who was dragging himself wearily back from successive terrors of pain and flame